Identification and Functions of Metadiscourse

LI Fa-gen
Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

Metadiscourse and propositional content embody an integration of dependency and coexistence and connection and distinction. Its purpose lies in exploring the relations between text producers and texts and text producers and audience. Metadiscourse is a self-reflective method that the writer or speaker makes use of it to express the experiential meanings in the world, to organize the text, and to negotiate interactional meanings in a text and engage with audience as members of a particular community. Metadiscourse is an essential part in discourse analysis. First, this paper emphasizes on the introduction and analysis of definition, nature, features, and key principles of metadiscourse, and divides metadiscourse into two types based on the previous research. Second, it will explore the realizing form of metadiscourse and reveal the relations between the identification of metadiscourse and context. Finally, the author focuses on the analysis of the relations between the metadiscoursal functions and Hallidayan three metafunctions and on the analysis of similarities and differences, and points out the fact that metadiscourse mainly has four semantic functions: experiential function, textual (interactive) function, interpersonal (interactional) function, and rhetorical function.

Keywords: metadiscourse, identification, functions

Introduction

Metadiscourse is an umbrella term and a fuzzy term. Different writers discuss it from different perspectives. Metadiscourse has always been characterized as simply “discourse about discourse” or “talk about talk”. This is a very partial and unsatisfactory view of a concept which has enormous potential to include features of language which describes not only how we organizes our ideas, but also how we to our readers or listeners. This fuzziness is remarked on by Swales (1990, p. 188) and by Nash (1992), who observed that while the concept is easy to accept in principle; it is more difficult to establish its boundaries:

The word “metadiscourse” may have a reassuringly objective, “scientific” ring, but its usage suggests boundaries of definition no more firmly drawn than those of, say, “rhetoric” or “style”. One reader may perceive a clear stylistic intention in something which another reader dismisses as a commonplace, “automatized” use of language. (Nash, 1992, p. 100)

Some writers have restricted the term to features of rhetorical organization by including only those text elements which refer to the text itself (Bunton, 1999; Mauranen, 1993a, 1993b; Valero-Garces, 1996). Others have narrowed the term to explicit illocutionary predictates (Beauvais, 1989).

Fairclough (1992) saw metadiscourse as a kind of “manifest intertextuality” where interacts with his/her own text. Geisler (1994), on the other hand, referred to both metadiscourse and “rhetorical processes”,

LI Fa-gen, Ph.D., professor, Foreign Languages College, Jiangxi Normal University.
contrasting these with what she calls “domain content”.

Generally, rhetoricians, applied linguists, and composition theorists agree on using metadiscourse in a wide sense, to refer to the various linguistic tokens employed to guide or direct a reader through a text so both the text and the writer’s stance is understood.

The common thread in definitions of metadiscourse is that it concerns meanings other than propositional ones. Vande Kopple (1985) defined metadiscourse as “the linguistic material which does not add propositional information but which signals the presence of an author”, and Crismore (1983) referred to it as “the author’s intrusion into the discourse, either explicitly on non-explicitly, to direct rather than inform, showing readers how to understand what is said and meant in the primary discourse and how to ‘take’ the author” (p. 2).

Another key issue in the metadiscourse concerns whether metadiscourse is a syntactic or functional category, with some analysts even adopting both approaches simultaneously (Crismore, Markknen, & Steffensen, 1993). Most writers have adopted a functional approach and sought to classify the linguistic tokens, or metadiscourse makers, according to the functions they perform in a text (Lautamatti, 1978; Meyer, 1975; Williams, 1981). In metadiscourse studies, it refers to how language works to achieve certain communicative purposes for users.

Because metadiscourse analysis involves taking a functional approach to texts, writers in this area have tended to look to the systemic functional theory of language for insights and theoretical support. Within SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics), language is seen as being organized around, and realizing three metafunctions: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function.

According to the previous studies, writers have explored the three key notions of proposition and levels of meaning and function. Hyland and Tse (2004) regarded them as three key principles of metadiscourse; these are: (1) that metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse; (2) that metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions; and (3) that metadiscourse refers only to relations which are internal to the discourse.

As Hyland (2005/2008) said, metadiscourse is the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community. To speak it simply, metadiscourse is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language education, referring to an interesting and relatively new approach to conceptualize interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users.

### Identification of Metadiscourse

#### Categorization of Metadiscourse

The previous analysts study metadiscourse from different perspectives. Some discuss it from the perspective of words and expressions (Ifantidou, 2005, p. 1326; Vande Kopple, 1985, p. 83). Some specialize the functions of metadiscourse according to the punctuations (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 157). Some analyze it from the perspective of textual function and interpersonal function (Vande Kopple, 1985; Crismore et al., 1993, pp. 47-54). And some discuss it from the perspective of visual metadiscourse (Kumpf, 2000, p. 404). According to what have been discussed on the classification for metadiscourse, we can classify metadiscourse into two types: non-verbal expressions of metadiscourse and verbal expressions metadiscourse. Table 1 represents these non-verbal aspects of metadiscourse.
Table 1
*Non-verbal Aspects of Metadiscourse (Based on Crismore et al., 1993, p. 48)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-verbal metadiscourse signals</th>
<th>Oral</th>
<th>Written</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paralanguage</td>
<td>Printing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intonation</td>
<td>Binding quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>Paper quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voice quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proxemics</td>
<td>Genre and media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Book, letter, postcard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Screen, print, handwriting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical distance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kinesics</td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gesture</td>
<td>Scare quotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posture</td>
<td>Underline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Italics and bold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclamation markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emoticons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 represents these verbal aspects of metadiscourse.

Table 2
*Verbal Aspects of Metadiscourse (Based on Hyland, 2005/2008, pp. 49-64)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal metadiscourse signals</th>
<th>Experiential function</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Interactive function</th>
<th>Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transition markers</td>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>Interactive function</td>
<td>Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frame markers</td>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td></td>
<td>Consequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endophoric markers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evidentials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Code glosses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interactional function</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self mention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identification of Metadiscourse

As the above-mentioned, when we study metadiscourse, we should obey the three key principles of metadiscourse. The three key principles can help us identify metadiscourse. The first principle is that metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse. Definitions of metadiscourse draw a line between propositional material, or the “communicative content” of discourse, and on the one hand, material which organizes this content and conveys the writer’s beliefs and attitude to it on the other. Sinclair (1981) offered a model of text which rests on two basic components. One is the expressive, attitudinal, interactional, or interpersonal plane which reflects the need of language users to negotiate their affairs with one another; and the other is the textual, organizational, and text-maintenance plane where speakers or writers transform the world outside to the world of language. On the autonomous plane, language works to organize and share relevant experiences and is “concerned with language only and not with the means by which language is related to the world outside the text”. On the interactive plane, it seeks to negotiate and engage readers with those experiences. Hunston (2000, p. 183) saw the distinction in terms of the roles of writer and reader. At any point, the writer is an informer and the reader is informed by the structure and nature of the text; this is the autonomous plane. At the same time, on the interactive plane, the writer is acting as a text constructor and the reader is informed through moment-by-moment negotiation (see Example 1).

Example (1) (a) A taxonomic scheme such as the one the author presents below is not just a neutral description of diversity but a theory in itself. (science textbook)

(b) “Political correctness” is a tired old expression, not used much nowadays by anybody but the Daily Mail, which employs it as a weapon with which to castigate the left.

The “taxonomic scheme” in Example (1a) might be a specific example, something referred to and discussed in the text itself, or a reference to all such schemes existing in the world beyond the text, so the statement in Example (1a) is a propositional matter. The newspaper columnist in Example (1b) might be evaluating the expression “political correctness” as part of the discourse, or its actual manifestation in real-world behaviours, so the statement in Example (1b) is a non-propositional material.

The second principle is that metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions.

An important characterization of interactions relevant to this discussion is provided by Thompson (2001) and Thompson and Thetela (1995) who not only separated the ideational and interactive aspects of texts but also distinguished two main types of interaction. These they call the interactive and the interactional. Interactive resources concern the ways writers signal the arrangement of their texts based on their appreciation of the reader’s likely knowledge and understandings. Interpersonal resources are more personal and involve the reader collaboratively in the development of the text. These concern the writer’s explicit interventions to comment on and evaluate material, and so relate more directly to Halliday’s interpersonal metafunction.

Example (2) (a) Harimison returns to the attack, but he overpitches and Jacobs punches him straight down the ground for four lovely runs. (cricket over-by-over commentary)

A marketing research project is undertaken to help resolve a specific marketing problem but first the problem must be clearly defined. (marketing textbook)

(b) The city is a great place to visit, but would you want to bank there? (advertisement)
First, preheat the oven to 190 degree C. Lightly grease 10 muffin cups, or line with muffin papers. (banana muffin recipe)

c) I think there are some ways to solve this problem.

Frankly, John is incompetent.

In Example (2a), the conjunctions “but, first” function ideationally, connecting propositions and signalling writer’s understanding of the relations between ideas by creating links with statements about the world.

In Example (2b), the conjunctions “but, first” function interactionally to engage the reader as a participant in the discourse, recognizing his/her need for explicit signalling of links in the argument.

In Example (2c), “frankly” and “I think” express the speakers’ attitude, realize the speakers’ presence, and function interactionally.

The third principle is that metadiscourse refers only to relations which are internal to the discourse. An internal relation connects events in the account and is solely communicative, while an external relation refers to those situations themselves. As Halliday (1994, p. 325) put it:

Many temporal conjunctives have an “internal” as well as an “external” interpretation; that is, the time they refer to is the temporal unfolding of the discourse itself, not the temporal sequence of processes refers to. In terms of the functional components of semantics, it is interpersonal not experiential time.

Example (3) (a) In contrast to Western culture, Asian societies put emphasis on an interdependent view of self and collectivism. (textbook)

A travelcard makes it possible to visit all these sites in one day. (London guide)

(b) In contrast, these findings were not found, among the low collectivists. (Ph.D. dissertation)

It is possible that strauss will also pull out of the tour to Zimbabwe this winter. (Newspaper)

In Example (3a), “in contrast” compares the characteristics of two cultures, “possible” represents an outcome as depending on certain circumstances, so the two statements in Example (3a) are propositional. In Example (3b), “in contrast” flags a disjunctive relation, alerting the reader to a move away from the expectancies set up by the prior text, “possible” comments on the writer’s estimation of possibilities, the two statements express metadiscoursal functions.

From what we have been discussed, we can come to the conclusion that we can depend on the three key principles to identify metadiscourse. At the same time, we can also find that metadiscourse and Halliday’s metafunctions have some similarities and differences. First, both of them emphasize on meanings in context, how language is used, not what a dictionary says about it. Second, metadiscourse analysts categorized metadiscourse as either performing a textual function by organizing a coherent, or performing an interpersonal function by conveying the writer’s attitudes to the text. For Halliday, three metafunctions do not operate independently and discretely but are expressed simultaneously in every utterance. The meaning of a text lies in the integration of all three functions, each of which is understood in relation to the others. Third, because of different perspectives and different points of view, there are some differences in discourse analysis. Metadiscourse analysts see writers as conducting interaction with their readers and obey the three principles of metadiscourse: Metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse; metadiscourse refers to aspects of the text that embody
writer-reader interactions; metadiscourse refers only to relations which are internal to the discourse. Halliday (1994, p. 70) stated that propositional material is something that can be argued about, affirmed, denied, doubted, insisted upon, qualified, tempered, regretted and so on. Metadiscourse expressed writer-reader interactions which were divided into two main types: interactive and interactional. Interactive function helps to guide the reader through the text, while interactional function involves the reader in the text. Thompson (2001) pointed out that these two aspects of interaction, the interactive and the interactional, “are essentially the two sides of the same coin” (p. 61). So-called textual metadiscourse is actually another aspect of the interpersonal features of a text.

The third key feature of metadiscourse is that metadiscourse distinguishes external and internal relations. An internal relation connects events in the account, organizing the discourse as an argument and expressing metadiscoursal function. An external relation connects activities in the world outside the text. So in the process of analyzing texts, we can find the differences of functions between metadiscourse and Halliday’s metafunctions. Hyland and Tse (2004) suggested that it is not quite correct to divide metadiscourse into textual metadiscourse and interpersonal metadiscourse. The classification of interactive and interactional fully embodies metadiscoursal feature of nature.

Functions of Metadiscourse

The term functional has a number of meanings in applied linguistics, but in metadiscourse studies it refers to how language works to achieve certain communicative purposes for users. Metadiscourse mainly has four functions, that is, experiential function, interactive function, interactional function, and rhetorical function.

Experiential Function

Thompson states that we are looking at the clause from the experiential perspective of how entities and events in the world are referred to (in crude terms, who did what to whom and in what circumstances). Halliday (1994) put it as follows:

The ideational function: the use of language to represent experience and ideas. This roughly corresponds to the notion of “propositional content” discussed earlier and concerns perceptions of the world and our own consciousness. When we talk about experiential function of metadiscourse, it seems to be contradictory to the metadiscoursal principle “metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspect of discourse”. Metadiscourse is not “secondary” to the meaning of a text but specialized. Metadiscourse does not simply support propositional content: it is the means by which propositional content is made coherent, intelligible, and persuasive to a particular audience. Metadiscourse itself implicates propositional components. It can be identified syntactically. The realization of metadiscoursal resources is words, phrases, and clauses. Any clause expresses experiential function. Metadiscourse clauses focus on mental processes, relation processes, verbal processes, existential processes, for example:

Mental processes: I hope…, you can see that…, I cannot doubt that…, we must believe that…, I think…

Relation processes: It is clear that…, The point is…, I am sure that…, It is possible to envisage…, The reasons for these choices are simple.

Verbal processes: I will discuss…, I predict in the next section…, Smith claims that…, You may not agree that…, I state…, I can form no opinion…, I will now discuss each of these core businesses…, To illustrate how attractive this market is…, It is may hope that…, We conclude/recommend…, Most of you will oppose the idea that…
Existential processes: There is good reason to…

It is clear that metadiscoursal clauses focus on verbal processes, mental processes, and relational processes, very little about material processes and behavioural processes.

**Interactive Function**

Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore (1993) once divided metadiscourse markers into textual and interpersonal types. This kind of classification is not quite correct according to the features of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is comprised of the two dimensions of interaction. The interactive dimension concerns the writer’s awareness of a participating audience and the ways he/she seeks to accommodate its probable knowledge, interests, rhetorical expectations, and processing abilities. The writer’s purpose here is to shape and constrain a text to meet the needs of particular readers, setting out arguments so that they will recover the writers preferred interpretations and goods. There are five broad sub-categories:

1. **Transition markers** are mainly conjunctions and adverbial phrases which help readers interpret pragmatic connections between steps in an argument, such as “and”, “furthermore”, “by the way”, “similarly”, “likewise”, “thus”, “therefore”, “in conclusion”, “nevertheless”, “in any case”, “admittedly”, and so on. They express relations between main clauses.
2. **Fram markers** signal text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure, such as “first”, “then”, “to summarize”, “I argue here”, “my purpose is”, “there are several reasons why”, “well”, “right”, and so on. They refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages.
3. **Endophoric markers** are expressions which refer to other parts of the text (see Tables 1-2, refer to the next section, as noted above). They refer to information in other parts of the text.
4. **Evidentials** are metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source which guide the reader’s interpretation and establish an authorial command of the subject, such as “according to x” and “z states”. They refer to information from other texts.
5. **Code glosses** supply additional information, by rephrasing, explaining, or elaborating what has been said, to ensure the reader is able to recover the writer’s intended meaning, such as “this is called”, “in other words”, “that is”, “this can be defined as”, and so on. They elaborate propositional meanings.

**Interactional Function**

The interactional dimension concerns the ways writers conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message. It involves the reader in the text. Once again, there are five sub-categories.

1. **Hedges** are devices such as “possible”, “might”, and “perhaps”, which indicate the writer’s decision to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition. They withhold commitment and open dialogue.
2. **Boosters** are words such as “clearly”, “obviously”, and “demonstrate”, which allow writers to close down alternatives, head off conflicting views, and express their certainty in what they say. They emphasize certainty or close dialogue.
3. **Attitude markers** indicate the writer’s affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions. Attitude markers convey surprise, agreement, importance, obligation, and frustration, such as “agree”, “prefer”, “unfortunately”, and “appropriate”. They express writer’s attitude to proposition.
(4) Self mention refers to the degree of explicit author’s presence in the text measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives (I, me, mine, exclusive we, our, ours). They explicit reference to author(s).

(5) Engagement markers are devices that explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants, such as “consider”, “note”, and “you can see that”. They explicitly build relationship with reader.

**Rhetorical Function**

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion; it concerns arguments on matters about which there can be no formal proof. In the recent past, the notion of rhetoric tended to carry negative connotations, suggesting unscrupulous manipulation and coercion, but today it is a central concept to those working in text analysis and written communication.

Aristotle defines it as the art of finding available ways of establishing persuasive proof. He argued that persuasion has to be adjusted for differences in the three major components of communication: the speaker, the hearer, and the content of the argument. Further he suggested that to make an argument speakers had to attend to three points: the means of persuasion, language, and the organization of the argument. Of greatest interest to metadiscourse research, however, are the three means of persuasion: Ethos—the personal appeal of one’s character, Pathos—the appeal to emotions, and Logos—the appeal to reason. Ethos concerns the character of speaker and his/her credibility. Pathos concerns affective appeals and focuses on the characteristics of the audience rather than the speaker, considering its education level, ethnicity, gender, age, interests, background knowledge, group membership, and so on. Logos concerns the speech itself, its arrangement, length, complexity, types of evidence and arguments, and so on. Many metadiscourse analysts have discussed rhetorical effects, such as Crismore and Fransworth (1989), Hyland (2005/2008), and so on.

**Conclusions**

Metadiscourse is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language education, referring to an interesting and relatively new approach to conceptualizing interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users. In identify metadiscourse, firstly, we should grasp the features of nature and research categorization, then make full use of three key principles of metadiscourse to judge whether it is propositional meaning or metadiscourse meaning, internal relation, or external relation; it expresses writer-reader interactions. It is rational to employ Thompson and Thetela’s (1995) distinction between interactive and interactional resources to acknowledge the organizational and evaluative features of interaction. Metadiscoursal functions and Hallidayan three metafunctions have some similarities and differences. Metadiscourse mainly has four functions: experiential function, interactive function, interactional function, and rhetorical function.

**References**


